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ABSTRACT

U.S. student scores in science compare unfavorably with those of other nations, and other standardized test scores by U.S. students are also comparatively lower. Polls of parents indicate dissatisfaction with U.S. education. College teachers and employers feel that high school graduates are weak in skills. This document offers negative perceptions and statistics related to education, called overviews, while profiling both schools that match them and schools that are exceptions. Overview 1 indicates that researchers note standards degradation is a problem. Overview 2 observes that American employers and professors are concerned about the value of a high school diploma, the poor student work ethic, flat graduation rates, and woeful dropout rates. Overview 3 notes that in 1996 the SAT was recentered to bring a declining average back up to 500 points, masking an 80-point drop in average achievement since 1963. Overview 4 argues that encouragement of self-esteem over academic excellence puts pressures on schools to demonstrate student success, which leads to grade inflation. Overview 5 notes that only 17 states have standards in all four core subjects that are clear and comprehensive enough to lead to a common core of learning. Overview 6 reports concerns with other essential subject areas, such as science, history, geography, and literature. (Contains 69 endnotes.) (RKJ)

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THE AMERICAN EDUCATION DIET:
Can U.S. Students Survive on Junk Food?

Since the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, a report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education exposing the "rising tide of mediocrity" taking over American schools, education reform has been at the forefront of American consciousness and political rhetoric. However, in the fifteen years that have passed, there has been little to celebrate. According to the February 1998 release of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study Scores, the most comprehensive international comparison of schooling ever undertaken, American high school seniors, even those in advanced classes, are among the industrial world's least prepared. These figures should surprise nobody: according to 1996 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) science achievement scores, 40% of our 8th graders scored "Below Basic" and 43% of our seniors scored "Below Basic." And in reading, as measured by the most recent NAEP Reading Report Card, 41% of 4th grade students in the U.S. scored "Below Basic" -- the lowest possible level.

As achievement continues to be swept along by a tide of mediocrity, Americans are coming to the strong conviction that the public school system is failing to properly educate our children. The Center for Education Reform's *1997 National Survey of Americans' Attitudes Toward Education and School Reform* found a sobering 78% of Americans feel that our children are not receiving the education they need.[1] The 1997 Democratic Leadership Council's poll found only 3% of Americans grade the nation's public schools an A, while 43% would choose grades D or F.[2] Even when scoring their local schools (of which the public generally has a more idealistic view), 49% gave them a C, D, or F, according to *The 29th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll Of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools.*

And when it comes to those with the best first-hand knowledge of the education attained by today's public school graduates, college professors and employers, the analysis is even more discouraging. The 1998 Public Agenda *Reality*

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Check survey found that 76% of professors and 63% of employers believe that "a high school diploma is no guarantee that the typical student has learned the basics."[3] Similarly, the majority feels that students are weak on the skills needed to succeed in college or on the job. On the other hand, parents (and to an even greater degree teachers and students) are much more optimistic about the skills their children are getting in school, but ultimately profess ignorance as to where their child's performance actually ranks against other students. Seventy-three percent admit they know little or nothing about how their child compares to other students in the state, and the percentages rise to 80% and 87% respectively when making national or international comparisons.

Even without access to detailed information, however, parents know that the condition of education is not as it should be. The grassroots rallying cry for education reform, from school choice to higher standards to tenure reform, heard from community to community across the nation is testament to that. But armed fully with the facts, the push for meaningful reform can be strengthened and expanded significantly.

To that end, the following highlights trends in student achievement across the nation -- both to expose the chronic weaknesses that must be addressed, and to profile efforts that are working to turn things around, student by student and school by school.

I. Overview:

Researchers note that "standards degradation" is a problem for many schools. Although students may earn appropriate grades for what is expected in a class, what those expectations are is in question.[4]

The Rule:

- The United States had higher per capita public spending on elementary/secondary education than 14 of the 21 countries participating in the 1995 TIMSS. Yet, U.S. performance resembled, on average, the economically less-affluent countries (those with lower GNPs per capita and lower per capita expenditures on elementary/secondary education) participating in the general knowledge assessments. Two of the less affluent countries (Hungary and Slovenia) also outperformed the United States.[5]

- In 1994, only 25% of all high school graduates earned the "minimum" credits in academic courses called for by the National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983.[6]

- U.S. public schools tend to maintain student to non-teaching staff ratios that are around 18.9:1; while the student to teacher ratio is about 22.6:1[7] -- i.e. U.S. schools, on average, employ more non-teaching staff than teachers.

- Upon reviewing the dismal results of U.S. student performance on an international scale, American educational leaders blamed "low expectations and a curriculum that is too easy."[8]

THE EXCEPTION:

- Rafe Esquith, a fifth- and sixth-grade teacher at Hobart Elementary School in Los Angeles, requires her students to complete a year each of algebra and classical literature. Most children at Hobart are poor immigrants from families that don't speak English. Three-quarters come from single parent homes, and many come from alcoholic families, but Esquith has had enormous success holding the students to high standards. These students peg in the 98th percentile in the district's standardized math test, and in the 92nd percentile in English. The rest of the district, meanwhile, can be found in the 47th percentile in math and the 35th percentile in English.[9]

- In Minnesota, three charter schools participated in a January 1996 pilot administration of the state's basic graduation tests. When compared to their host districts, two charter schools had a higher percentage of students passing these exams in reading and one had a higher percentage passing in math.[10]

- In Baltimore, Maryland, the Carter G. Woodson Elementary School models itself on the no-nonsense, academically demanding Calvert School Program, a program taken from a successful Baltimore private school. But unlike the affluent private school, 90% of Woodson students are eligible for free lunch. No matter. The high academic expectation has resulted in increased standardized test scores in reading, writing, and math. Woodson is the second Baltimore elementary school to adopt the curriculum. The first, the Barclay School, is experiencing similar academic achievement.[11]

- The Westside Preparatory School in Chicago specializes in a rigorous, classically oriented curriculum that has some of its youngest students reading Plato and Socrates. "They don't have the right to fail in this school," Marva Collins, the founder of Westside Prep, said of her more than 200 students. The former Chicago public school teacher educator has gained recognition nationwide for her success at teaching urban minority children. As a result, there has been a resurgence in private schools targeting black students, who typically have been underachievers in the public school system. For example, the Solid Rock Academy in Riverdale, Ga., an Atlanta suburb requires its 150 pupils to wear

uniforms and to study a traditional curriculum that also includes a large dose of African-American history. "The American public school system has become stalemated because they have taken a lot of the discipline out," said Judith W. Lyon, the academy's director.[12] Parents send their children to the Preparatory Academy at Lexington, KY, because, "Most of the children were performing below grade level in math or reading, and the parents saw it as a unique opportunity to help their children," said program director Rosalind Hurley Richards.[13]

- The Campbell Elementary School, in a blighted neighborhood in Detroit, works with corporate sponsors that offer tutoring services. The Sylvan Learning Center offers specialized tutoring in reading, and the effect is evident. The school, which has some of the poorest students in the district, routinely scores better than other Detroit elementary schools. "We're above 70% in science, but we're not above that in math. We're at about 50%," said Campbell principal Ann Smith. "We're striving to do more."[14]

- Mabel B. Wesley Elementary is a public school that serves the violent, drug-infested Acres Homes section of Houston. All of its students qualify for federal Title I education funds, and its student body is 99% minority (93% black, 6% Hispanic). Under the educational direction of principal Thaddeus Lott, the school has graduated thousands of children whose reading and math scores rival those of their suburban peers. So popular was the program that residents petitioned the Houston school board to allow Lott to manage Wesley and three neighboring schools as a separate district. The district agreed in the spring of 1995. Before Lott introduced his educational philosophy in 1975, only 18% of Wesley's third-graders were scoring at or above grade level in reading comprehension on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. By 1980, 85% were achieving at or above grade level. In 1996, 100% of Wesley's third-graders passed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) in reading. Statewide, fewer than 70% of third-graders in schools with similar demographics passed. Lott makes this happen by avoiding popular education trends in favor of the basics: a proven curriculum, rigorous teacher training, strict discipline, high expectations of teachers and students, and a fervent belief that any child can learn.[15]

II. Attendance and Graduation Rates

American employers and professors are concerned about the value of a high school diploma; poor student work ethic, flat graduation rates, and woeful dropout rates buttress their concerns.

The Rule:

- While 73% of American high school teachers feel that a high school diploma means that the typical student has learned the basics, 63% of employers, and 76%

of professors believe that a diploma is no guarantee that students have at least learned the basics.[16]

- In 1996, 64% of high school students reported doing less than one hour of homework a night.[17] From an international perspective, U.S. students reported spending fewer hours on homework and studying per day than the international average for students in the final year of secondary school (1.7 and 2.6 hours respectively). Students in 15 nations (out of 19) reported spending more hours, on average, studying or doing homework per day than their U.S. counterparts.[18]

- ...Meanwhile, 30% of U.S. twelfth-grade students reported working more than 5 hours a day at a paid, non-instruction related job. This is more time spent at earning disposable income than students in any other nation involved in the Third International Math and Science Study.[19]

- Studies of European students show that 50% of them spend two or more hours on daily homework, and only 7 or 8% watch television for five or more hours a day. In the United States, only 29% of students report doing as much homework and three times as many watch television daily for five or more hours.[20]

- Despite the increased importance of a high school education, the high school completion rate for the country has been static over the last quarter century. The rate fluctuated around 84% between 1973 and 1983, moved up slightly between 1983 and 1992, and has been at about 86% since 1992.[21] Yet, as revealed in Public Agenda's 1998 *Reality Check* survey, even those who graduate do not necessarily possess the basic knowledge needed to succeed on the job or in college. Little more than a third of college professors and employers rank students' basic math skills as good or excellent, and little more than a quarter are satisfied with students' ability to write clearly.[22]

- Seventy-three percent of the students who enter the ninth grade in St. Louis, MO, never make it to graduation; 72% in Indianapolis, IN, never make it; nor do 68% of the students in Detroit, MI. In Atlanta, GA, 57% don't graduate; in Chicago, IL, and Denver, CO, it's 52%; 46% don't in Bridgeport, CT and 49% don't in Ft. Lauderdale; and the list goes on.[23]

- As of October 1996, the number of young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not in school and do not have a diploma registered at 12%. Broken down by ethnic groups, 7.3% of white students, 13% of black students, and 29.4% of Hispanic young adults are not in school and do not have a diploma.[24]

- The drop out rate is not simply a low-income issue. In 1995, the highest percentage was found among middle income students, who made up 56.1% of all dropouts.

THE EXCEPTION:

- Of charter school students who were failing in previous schools, 56.3% now report that their performance is "good" or "excellent," according to a study by the Hudson Institute.[25]

- In 1996, City Academy in St. Paul, MN, -- the nation's first charter school -- reported that all of its 42 graduates (all of whom were former dropouts) had been accepted into post-secondary programs.[26]

- According to Derek Neal's *The Effects of Catholic Secondary Schooling on Educational Achievement*, the benefits of Catholic schooling are great for urban minorities. Among urban blacks and Hispanics, the probability of high school graduation rises when the representative population is placed in a Catholic high school. In addition, urban minorities who attend Catholic schools can expect higher graduation rates from college and higher future wages.[27]

- In Milwaukee, a 1997 survey of the Parents Advancing Value Education (PAVE) scholarship program found that 75% of PAVE's scholarship graduates - all low-income, at-risk students - are continuing their education in college or technical schools.

III. SAT SCORES

One of the only mediums that allows us to uniformly assess annual progress nationwide is the SAT (Student Assessment Test). However, in 1996, test results were "recentered" to bring a declining average back up to 500 points, masking the approximate 80 point drop in average achievement since 1963. While the media congratulated students for a three point increase in math scores from 1996 to 1997 and flat verbal scores, it is those closest to the children -- the teachers, parents, employers – who know best whether or not things are getting better. Their evaluations, taken with larger evaluations like NAEP and many state proficiency tests, show that things have not changed for the better, many children are learning less, and that despite lower drop-out rates, more college-bound students and "better" SATs, *what* children are required to know today to get by is below standards of the past, and nowhere near what the future demands.

- Although blurred by recentering, SAT scores continue to lag behind achievements of thirty years ago. SAT scores dropped from 980 to 899 between 1963 and 1992, a period during which real per pupil spending rose 160%.[28]

- African American students still trail whites on the SATs by 169 points. Hispanic students score 143 points behind whites.[29]

- Over the last 20 years, the number of students earning top scores on the SAT has dropped in half.[30]

IV. Grade Inflation

In an educational environment that encourages self-esteem over academic excellence and puts pressures on schools to demonstrate student success, grade inflation has flourished...

- Since 1987, the proportion of SAT takers with grades in the "A" range has climbed from 28% to a record 37%, while their SAT scores have fallen.[31]

- The grade inflation phenomenon impacts disadvantaged inner city children, as well. Students in high-poverty areas with A's in English had, on average, the same reading test scores as students making C's and D's in the most affluent schools. Similar results were found for mathematics.[32]

- The latest annual survey from Who's Who Among American High School Students found that fewer than 3 in 10 teens included in the publication think their school is "very academically rigorous." More than half of the teens surveyed said they spent only an hour a day or less on homework. Nearly 8 of 10 of these top teens admit to cheating in school. Two-thirds of both students and parents say that cheating "is not a big deal."[33]

- Only 27% of the teachers surveyed by Who's Who think their schools are academically challenging, and 4 in 10 teachers say they challenge their students to work hard.[34]

...And the impact upon higher education is evident...

- According to the 32nd Annual Survey of Freshman Attitudes by American Council on Education (ACE) and the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), there is a gap between perception and reality regarding academic achievement. While a majority of freshman report having average high school grades of B- or higher, more than half of the students reported needing some type of remedial college school work. Despite the need for remedial work, 56 % of the surveyed students said they are above average in academic ability.[35] California State University trustees are considering an approach to cut remedial classes needed for incoming freshmen by testing college bound students while still sophomores in high school.

- In 1994, 46% of Maryland's state college entrants required remediation. Florida's tally was 60%.[36]

- In California, the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) found 54% of the state's fourth graders scoring below basic levels in math the same percentage as California State University students requiring remedial math instruction upon entry to the system in 1994.[37]

- And remedial work is costly. California State University reports that remedial classes cost the system about $10 million per year, and result in no college credit.[38]

Seventy-eight percent of higher education institutions offer remedial instruction. Twenty-nine percent of first-time freshman enroll in at least one remedial class.[39]

...As is the effect upon the workforce.

- A National Adult Literacy study illustrates Americans' poor preparation to enter the highly competitive international economy that requires a solidly educated and literate labor force. Only 11% of four-year college graduates were able to summarize two ways an attorney may challenge prospective jurors, based on information provided.[40]

- Wayne Allen, CEO of Phillips Petroleum and 1996 governor's education summit attendee, points out that "...the hot new business destination is Singapore, largely because of its educated workforce."[41]

- A 1998, National Association of Manufacturers report endorsed national tests, charter schools, and school vouchers as ways to improve the skills of high school graduates entering the workforce. The report reveals that the capabilities of high school students are not keeping up with the skill requirements of manufacturers. Forty percent of all 17-year-olds do not have the math skills and 60% of 17-year-olds do not have the reading skills to hold down a production job at a manufacturing company.

V. The 3 R's:

Given states readily concede that they have not done a good job of defining what children should know and be able to do by a certain grade. There has been a recent emphasis on adopting rigorous state standards, but considering that many states had no such frameworks as recently as 1995, there is much work ahead.

According to the American Federation of Teachers' *Making Standards Matter 1997*, **most states still need to improve some of their standards in order to provide the basis for a common core of learning. Only 17 states have standards in all four core subjects that are clear and comprehensive enough to lead to a common core of learning across the state (up from 15 in 1996). The other 32 states have standards that need improvement in one or more subject. Coming from a defender of the establishment, this is very sobering news.**

Scholars engaged by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation found that only 1 state had truly rigorous and clear standards in English, 1 in history, 3 in geography, 3 in math, and 6 in science. Failing grades were earned by state standards as follows: 12 out of 28 in English, 19 or 38 in history, 18 of 39 in Geography, 16 of 48 in math, and 9 of 36 in science.[42]

READING AND 'RITING

A distressing number of American students are incapable of reading at basic levels for their grades.

THE RULE:

- Forty-one percent of 4th grade students in the U.S. scored below the "basic" reading level, as measured by 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress Reading Report Card.[43]

- Only 24% of 4th graders are reading at the "proficient" level.[44]

- On the international scale, America's 9-year old students are second only to children from Finland in their ability to read. But as students move through our public school system, they drop progressively further behind students in the rest of the world. American students' progress in reading between the age of 9 and 14 was the worst among 16 nations based on a study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.[45]

- University of Illinois at Chicago professor Herbert J. Walberg points out national inefficiency in teaching reading through the inverse relationship between per-pupil spending and reading scores from the 1970's to the 1990's. While education spending rose over $2,000 per year per pupil, reading scores dropped over 60 points in the same period.[46]

- The Stanford 9, a norm referenced achievement test applied to District of Columbia students, recently found that more than half of 1998's graduating class failed to reach basic reading skills for their grade.[47]

- In Washington State, only 14% of fourth graders could pass all four subjects in the state's rigorous new standardized tests given in 1997. Only 42% mustered passing grades in reading.[48]

The Exception:

- Wichita, Kansas third graders in schools run by The Edison Project, a for-profit education contractor, are showing gains above scores from other city public schools on the same standardized test.

- The Accelerated Charter School in South Central Los Angeles recorded substantial increases in test scores (California Test of Basic Skills) from 1995 to 1996: math scores rose 50% and reading scores 16%. The student attendance rate, at 95%, is one of the highest in the area, and parent participation in school meetings is 80%.[49]

- At Academy Charter School in Castle Rock, CO, scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills for grades 2 through 7 increased 3 percentile points in reading, 4 in language, and 9 in math.[50] The school's charter was renewed recently in part because average test scores have increased 10-20%.[51] In April 1997, for the second year in a row, Academy Charter School received the Colorado Board of Education's John J. Irwin Colorado Schools of Excellence Award.[52]

- Upon first coming to Boston's City on a Hill, 55% of pupils (who are largely disadvantaged minority youth) were more than two years behind in reading. A year later, only 39% were.[53] By the end of their first year, 44% could read at grade level and 55% could write a good paragraph.[54]

- Excel Charter Academy in Grand Rapids showed dramatic achievement gains from fall 1995 to spring 1996. First grade reading scores improved 44%, with 73% of the students scoring above the national average. For the school overall, 69% scored above the 50th national percentile. First grade reading scores increased 25.1 points.[55]

And 'Rithmetic

In tandem with dismal NAEP results in 1996, the National Science Foundation released a study pointing to "lack of coherence" in math and science curricula as a major factor in the poor showing of U.S. students when compared with the world. "The U.S. curriculum is a mile wide and an inch deep" says an official in the National Science Foundation.[56]

THE RULE:

- Math teaching in Japan and Germany, both top-scoring countries in the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS), is characterized by developing topics and teaching concepts, in contrast with an episodic and procedural-oriented approach found in the U.S.[57]

- American high school seniors perform far worse than their counterparts in other developed nations, according to The Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) scores released in February, 1998. According to the results, American seniors outperformed only two of 21 nations in mathematics, finishing significantly below 14 nations. On the advanced math assessment of 15 countries, 11 countries outperformed our seniors.[58]

- Between 30 and 40% of American students are performing below basic skills in math across all grade levels, according to the NAEP 1996 Mathematics Report Card. For fourth-grade students, the percentage performing below the *Basic* level, the lowest possible level, was 36% in 1996, up from to 50% in 1990; for eighth-grade students, 38% didn't reach a basic level of competency in 1996, as compared to 48% in 1990; for twelfth-grade students, 31% were below basic in 1996, as compared to 42% in 1990 – improvements all, but still leaving much work to be done.[59]

- A 1998 report on Urban Student Achievement by Great City Schools and ACT Inc. shows that 1997's graduating class in big-city school systems lagged far behind national averages on the testing company's exams in math, English, reading, and science. That gap persisted across all levels of academic preparation, as measured by the number and rigor of courses students pursued.[60]

- In March 1998, The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation released their appraisal of state mathematics standards. Grades of A, B, C, D, or F were given to each state. On the whole, the nation failed. Only three states received a grade of A, and just nine others a grade of B. More than half receive grades of D or F.[61]

THE EXCEPTION:

- The Metropolitan Achievement Test given to all students in Wichita, Kansas, shows students in the Edison Project school to be well ahead in math abilities.[62]

- When students entered Phoenix, AZ's ABC Alternative Learning Center charter school in September 1995, approximately 30% were performing below grade level in reading and math. Each of those students received two hours of individual tutoring every week. The tutoring has now shifted from remedial to advanced

tutoring. According to the 1997 Stanford 9 Examination, all students in grades 3 through 6 scored at or above grade level.

- In 1996, third-graders at Parker's Core Knowledge Charter School posted the highest combined reading and math scores on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills in their county, composed of 23 elementary schools. Parker's third graders' math scores hit the 94th percentile.[63]

VI. Other Essentials:

History, Geography, and Literature

- The 1994 NAEP assessment of U.S. History achievement levels shows an accelerating decline in basic ability from 4th through 12th grades. Thirty-five percent of fourth graders have not attained basic levels of proficiency. That percentage increases to about 39% for 8th graders; by 12th grade, about 57% are below basic skills in U.S. History...[64]

- ...Meanwhile, in 1997, the Department of Education reported that only 41% of social studies teachers have a higher degree in the subject.[65]

- The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation reports that only 5 of 38 states with history standards are optimal, while 19 receive failing marks. "What does this mean? Most importantly, it says that the vast majority of young Americans are attending school in states that do not consider the study of history to be especially important."[66]

- Geography is the core subject most neglected by U.S. schools according to the Fordham Foundation.

- In 1996, only four states required students to take a foreign language in order to graduate. Twenty-six States required two or fewer years of mathematics, and 32 required 2 or fewer years of science.[67]

Science

- According to The Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) Rankings, released in February 1998, American seniors scored far below 11 countries, and ahead of only two in science. On the physics assessment, U.S. students were outperformed by students in 14 nations and performed roughly equally with one nation.[68]

- Results of the 1996 NAEP show that while students with "advanced" skills in science held steady at a meager 3% through all grade levels, students performing below basic skills, the very lowest achievement level, increased steadily with grade level: 33% in grade four, 39% in grade eight, and 43% in grade twelve.

- The Fordham Foundation's appraisal of state science standards found six states (17%) achieved A's, seven (19%) achieved B's, seven achieved C's, seven D's, and nine earned F's. "The overall average performance is mediocre and very disappointing."[59]

This glance at American educational achievement, juxtaposed against too few – but heartening -- exceptions, affirms the need for education reform and it's potential for improving students' learning and prospects. Throughout the public school system, from earliest elementary to completion of a university degree, we see a dire lapse of standards about which the system seems to have become complacent. Too many public schools are leaving our kids intellectually starved while providing a junk food curriculum based on low standards and inadequate academic rigor.

Dave DeSchryver
Policy Analyst
Special thanks to Corrin Rausenberger, 1997 Intern

For more information about the condition of schooling and how to help, contact The Center for Education Reform (202) 822-9000.

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